

ENSURING HEALTHY TRANSITIONING POST DISASTER ASSIGNMENTS:
GUIDELINES FOR MENTAL HEALTH WORKERS AS FACILITATORS FOR
ENHANCING RESILIENCE

Diane Bridgeman, Ph.D.
(831) 420-1109
10/05

- Our offer to talk/meet with volunteers/workers who return from a disaster assignment or similar critical incident responding is primarily to provide a safe, confidential place where the person can share their experiences.
- It is important to make contact, even just leaving a message for further contact, within the first or second day of the volunteer/workers return home.
- Follow the first contact with a time for them (a time that is compatible for your schedule as well as theirs), to come in to meet with you if they are comfortable doing so, if they prefer just telephone contact that is certainly fine. If they are not wanting to make contact at all, that has to be honored.
- These “post assignment check-ins” are not meant to be psychotherapy. They are for stress-reduction purposes, psycho-educational, and a trusting place to vent and learn about self-care.
- Often just posing a few key questions can be helpful, such as; tell me a few aspects of this experience that went well for you, and perhaps not so well, and what were a few things you learned from this experience? These inquiries can serve as the primary structure of the discussion, while allowing the interaction to be free flowing and relaxed can compliment this process.
- It is crucial that the volunteers or disaster workers are acknowledged for giving their time and talent and validated for this effort.
- It is wise to advise the person to try, if possible, to not return to work or other volunteer efforts right away. Reconnecting with love ones seems obvious, yet highlighting it as a foundation for re-stabilizing ones life is helpful.
- The degree of the impact of the critical incident experience on the person will, of course, depend on many factors, such as- previous traumatic exposures and experience in dealing with them, how close the person was, or involved with, the actual disaster/incident or those impacted, while age, gender, and strength of support systems are also important indicators.
- Modeling and discussing how you work toward giving yourself permission to be vulnerable, and that we as mental health workers may also experience a range of,

at times, confusing feelings from our work in disasters can be a helpful strategy.

- Intrusive thoughts are not uncommon after challenging incidents, thus means to cope with intense thoughts are valuable. Writing in a journal, talking with a friend, setting a time to reflect on the thoughts so that don't become ruminating can all be useful.
- Outline healthy self-care practices such as; getting extra and sound sleep, regular exercise, time to reconnect with friends and family, healthy eating, meditating, dancing, visualizing a peaceful setting, time in nature, for hobbies and nurturing experiences.
- Inquire about previous challenges that they worked through, or ask what helped them to cope with previous disaster work assignments as this can allow them to recall their strengths and help them to put the experience into perspective and encourage a sense of resilience and optimism.